Achieving True Inclusion

by Erika Smith

My office phone rings. This is never good. Someone is in trouble. Someone needs serious help. There is a preschooler who is out of control. As an inclusion specialist, this is largely a part of my job: supporting children who are so unruly, they constantly disrupt the learning environment. I answer my phone and find that my assumption was correct. I rise from my desk and take a deep breath before heading down the hallway to the classroom in need.

When I arrive, the majority of the students are huddled in a corner with the teacher and one lone child is yelling and throwing the plastic food from the dramatic play area. He is a big boy, four years of age, a little over three feet tall and a solid 80 pounds. As he yells to be left alone and that he wants to go home, tears are streaming down his face. I advise the teacher to remove the children from the classroom and to find a quiet place to engage in a game with them.

I do not attempt to stop the boy from throwing and yelling. It is apparent that he has strong emotions about something right now. In a kind voice, I let him know that I am sad to see that he is so upset. I ask him what he is feeling and why he is throwing things in the classroom. Now I have his attention, and he stops throwing items across the room; instead, he is tossing them right at his feet. This means it is okay for me to come closer, so I do. I tell him again how sad I am, not because he threw the things in the classroom but because he is so upset. I explain that I am here to listen and that I want to give him a big hug. Without any hesitation he comes charging at me to bury his face in my stomach, he holds on so tight and cries and cries. I stroke his back gently and keep repeating that I will listen.

I take him by the hand and lead him out of this classroom to a quiet place in the hallway. He plops on the floor and I get down there next to him. He tells me he wants to go home to be with his mom and he misses his sister. He goes on to tell me that his sister is in heaven and he wants to see her. Finally, I have gotten him to tell me what it is.

This incident is one of many for this student. He has poor attendance and when he is here, this is often the way he expresses himself. Each time, I get a little more information from him. Each time, he becomes a little more trusting of me. Each time, he becomes more and more vulnerable.

I hold him close and tell him that I understand, and I do. I lost my brother at the age of 43 to cancer, so I know the pain of missing a sibling. I tell him that my brother is in heaven too, I miss him a lot and it makes me sad. Sometimes I even cry. He is surprised that I cry and asks me if I know his sister.

"I do not, but if you miss her so much that you have such big feelings, she must have been awesome."

"Yeah, her play with me all the time and take me to the store," he replies.

We continue to talk and hold each other. I explain that big feelings are okay and that we have to find a way to share our big feelings without hurting others. He agrees that we will try to do this a different way together.

Erika Smith is the director of education and inclusion at Acelero Learning. She has worked in the field of early childhood since 2008. Smith believes the work she does is one of the most important jobs in society. All children should be afforded the same opportunities to learn in an environment that encourages exploration and unlimited development. She has held various positions in the field of early childhood, including coach, trainer and director.

It is 2021, and within the realm of our education sector we have evolved. The way education is delivered is so very different from what it used to be. Think back to one room schoolhouses that often were also the local place of worship. Some townships did not even have a schoolhouse, and children traveled miles upon miles to go to school. Many of the school houses were segregated, some based on gender while others were based on the color of skin. Advancements made in schoolhouse dwellings alone are baffling. Children are able to attend schools that have solid foundational structures, multiple floors, libraries with an abundance of books and STEM labs with state-of-the-art equipment. Most families have the choice to send their children to public schools, private, magnet, charter, or virtual schools, or even academies with international baccalaureate programs. But for other families, the stark reality is that segregation is still happening based on color, economic status and the need for inclusion.

Many school districts have been making attempts to implement models of diversity, equity and inclusion. There are many companies to choose from, all of which collect data on disparities and train staff to ensure that inclusion is happening. Schools are implementing these models in response to the awareness of continuous and rising disparities among children. Districts across the nation are developing programs, procedures and policies that promote inclusion of all children, regardless of their skin color, ethnicity, economic status and cultural beliefs.

These very same districts struggle to realize that inclusion goes beyond just these categories, and must also encompass children with disabilities, mental health issues and trauma-related behaviors.

An article written for the Institute for Child Success states that 8,700 3- and 4-year-olds are expelled from their state-funded preschools or pre-kindergarten classrooms each year. The thought of children this young being expelled should make us all feel appalled. If we do our own research we will find that, additionally, a large number of these expelled students are young males of color.

How can those of us in this field explain the reality of this? If we are honest about the dynamics of a classroom and a school building, one aspect is that, as an adult, teacher, or school official, we want to be respected and in control. Often, the struggle with challenging behavior is not about the behavior itself, but rather about who has more control, the teacher or the student.

Some educators do not want to address behaviors; they just want to teach. They hold the attitude, "I am the teacher, I have control of the classroom. Students should respect what I ask of them and be compliant." Other educators are drawn the other end of the spectrum, which is sympathy. To be honest, neither of these attitudes are particularly beneficial to forging relationships with students, which is the foundation for working through challenging behavior. Challenging behavior is multi-tiered and complicated, interventions take a lot of work, and most often progress is slow. As educators, we should not lower our expectations but instead alter our response.

When we look at the environments from which our children come, many behaviors are explainable. Even taking the pandemic out of the equation, consider all of the things going on in the world. Most communities have limited mental health resources, while at the same time they are experiencing increased homelessness, unemployment rates, drug overdoses and instances of police violence against Black men and women.

How can we expect young children to express how these injustices make them feel? The world around them feels unstable and unpredictable, and in the one place they should experience consistency, school, they are instead consistently chastised or in trouble.

Let us be honest, as educators we do not fully understand these situations or environments ourselves, therefore we do not know how to respond to them. Yet we expect children to.

What would you do if a child approached you and said, "Ms. Smith, I am really sad because my mom leaves us home alone to do meth with her boyfriend and when they come home they fight and break things in the house." Or, "Ms. Smith, I am really tired because my mom works two jobs so we are home by ourselves all night and I am afraid to go to sleep because I always hear people fighting and then I hear gun shots. When I hide under my bed I can see all the roaches crawling everywhere."

Would you chastise them? Yell at them in front of the class to humiliate them? Send them to time out? Of course not! However, we do these things every day. Children do not come to us and say these things out loud, but instead present us with challenging behavior, which is their form of communication. Their actions are the way they tell their story, the way they beg for our help. Often, instead of celebrating their resilience, we scold them.

When children exhibit challenging behaviors, or otherwise act in a disruptive manner, educators often feel the need to assign a consequence. As educators, we become frustrated with challenging behavior because it can be so disruptive. The need for social-

emotional inclusion is harder to see, as it is not as visible as physical disabilities.

We must remember that the idea is to correct the behavior, which cannot be done through punishment. Imagine how you would feel if you made a mistake and your boss humiliated you in front of everyone, and then told you to go back and try again—again, in front of your peers. This would not correct your behavior in any way, and would also affect your relationship with your boss. Instead, you would want your boss to pull you aside privately and not only explain to you what you did wrong, but give you some tips on how to change course. This is what children need from us. In order to correct their behavior, they need an adult who cares enough, and is patient enough, to pull them aside and help them make better choices.

When thinking of challenging behaviors, we educators should consider several important factors. The basic foundation for addressing challenging behavior is to build a relationship with the student. In order to do this, we must not be offended by the undesired behavior, but instead try to understand what that behavior is telling us. If you cannot build a relationship with this student, so that they trust you as a safe place, you will not be able to help them correct that behavior.

Remember, that the idea is to correct the behavior, not punish the behavior. Celebrate the child's effort no matter how many failures occur; an attempt is a display of resilience. Most importantly, remember that the only person you can change and control is yourself. You cannot change a child with challenging behavior; however, you have the power to control how you respond to that child. The way you respond will determine if you are able to influence that child and partner with them.

It has been several months now, and we have nearly made it to the end of a long school year. My office phone rings. This may not be good. Someone may be in trouble, someone may need serious help. There may be a preschooler who is out of control.

In order to correct their behavior, they need an adult who cares enough, and is patient enough, to pull them aside and help them make better choices.

I answer my phone to see where I am needed. I rise from my desk and take a deep breath before heading down the hallway to the classroom that called. Yes, it is the student who gets upset when he misses his sister and throws things all over the classroom. As I near the door, I hear commotion. When I open the door, the boy is dancing and celebrating with his teacher and peers. He was angry and missing his sister, but instead of throwing items he has learned that he can ask his teacher for a hug or draw a picture for his sister.

Today he did both. He rushes over to hug my waist as he explains to me that he did it, that he made a better choice and he did not throw anything or hurt his friends. This time it is me with tears streaming down my face. To see how proud he is of himself, to see that he now understands there are people who care and will not give up on him—it makes me cry. It is an amazing feeling, being part of a team of educators who worked to understand his behavior, teach him how to recognize it, identify it and label it, in order to work through it.

I look at this young Black male, who is now able to understand and talk about how he feels, and I hope others will continue to foster that, so he never feels the need to turn to the streets to be understood. I hope that he never needs to turn to violence to get his point across, so that he never will see the inside of an institution where he will need to carry out line basics (taught in elementary school) in order to survive. This moment gives me hope, and stories like his are the reason I come to work every day and will continue to fight for inclusion that encompasses children with challenging behaviors. Then, and only then, will there be a true display of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Reference

Stegelin, D.A. (2018). Preschool Suspension and Expulsion: Defining the Issues. Instituteforchildsuccess.org.